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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 006567

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: REDEFINING NATIONALISM FOR SHORT-TERM
POLITICAL GOALS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (b
(b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Domestic and regional threats and transformations -- including EU membership reforms, PKK violence, Cyprus and conflict in Lebanon -- have created a backlash of nationalism that Turkey's political factions are manipulating as elections approach. The pace of reform at all levels in Turkey has brought change faster than some sectors of society are prepared to absorb. The military and opposition parties -- both left and far right -- are brandishing "nationalism" to ward off what they perceive as threats to Turkey's secular order. For them, the pro-Islam Justice and Development Party (AKP) government personifies that "fundamentalist" threat. In Turkey, "nationalism" has traditionally been equated with a strong dose of patriotism. Today, it seems aimed at preserving the status quo, but without offering an alternative vision. End summary.

¶2. (U) In Turkey, "nationalism" has long been a mix of "we are all Turks" a la Ataturk and patriotism. It consists of the imperative of maintaining the country's territorial integrity and standing up for the Kemalist principles on which modern Turkey is based. Additional traditional rallying points have included Cyprus and the fight against the PKK/separatism.

¶3. (C) Today, the primary goal of the opposition (primarily the Republican People's Party (CHP)) and the military is to limit the ruling AKP's influence. They do not want AKP -- either PM Erdogan or another AKP stalwart -- to ascend to the presidency in May, a step that would give the AKP control over the three key pillars of government. Under the guise of nationalism, they charge AKP with attacking the sacrosanct secular nature of the Turkish state and with promoting Islamic fundamentalism. Several senior military officials and President Sezer have warned of an increasing trend toward Islamic conservatism in Turkish society and the need to stand firm against the PKK threat. Military officials have accused the government of not protecting Turkey's secular system, expressing concern about the growth of radical Islamic associations in the neighborhoods, particularly in the less-developed Southeast region. The opposition used similar tactics during the parliamentary debate on deployment of Turkish troops to UNIFIL, arguing it was not in Turkey's national interest to venture abroad when the PKK was wreaking havoc at home.

14. (C) The nationalism rhetoric has also created greater constraints on finding new approaches to ending the PKK violence, Turkey's top priority. A recent proposal for a type of amnesty for some PKK members by the center-right True Path Party (DYP) leader was shot down by the CHP and the military, tying Erdogan's hands to explore the sensitive issue. If an amnesty of sorts worked to reduce PKK violence, as has happened in the past, it would be a significant accomplishment for Erdogan and the AKP, and an outcome the military and opposition would find hard to stomach. In the same vein and using similar tactics, the opposition and military have limited Erdogan's ability to negotiate with Iraqi government representatives with Kurdish ties.

15. (C) The debate over whether EU membership is in Turkey's interest highlights the nationalism divide. Progress toward EU membership means change -- in Turkish society, in the economy and in the balance of civil-military power. Those who stand to lose power use nationalism to undermine efforts at reform. Article 301, the penal code provision that criminalizes "insulting Turkishness", is a notable example. Using nationalist rhetoric, opposition leaders have attacked AKP members who have suggested reforming Article 301 to clarify its application. This has stayed Erdogan's hand. Despite heavy pressure from EU officials, PM Erdogan backed off an Article 301 reform proposal and instead consulted with NGOs for their input on how to revise the controversial provision. He may have dodged the opposition's bullet, but at the expense of postponing a reform that could buy Turkey much-needed support for its EU membership campaign.

16. (C) On Cyprus, ever a highly-charged nationalist issue, while AKP has burnished its pro-Turkish Cypriot credentials, the opposition has put the government in a box - it knows it

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would be political suicide to make any Cyprus-related concessions absent consensus from opposition and the military. In today's atmosphere that is not feasible. As the PM recently stated, "There is no Turkish government right now that would give away Cyprus." Erdogan's uncompromising stance has neutralized Cyprus as a weapon against him, at the cost of progress on EU membership and relations with the West.

17. (C) The most recent example is President Sezer's veto of nine sections of the Foundations Law, which would have created limited ability for religious foundations to reclaim property earlier confiscated by the state. Within parliament, CHP fought certain provisions of the law tooth and nail, filibustering in committee and ultimately watering down certain provisions. Under the nationalism banner, returning property to other confessions is taboo.

18. (C) As a result, President Sezer, senior military officials and the CHP fiercely defend the status quo against reforms and changes that would be, in many cases, a continuation of the modernization Ataturk encouraged. The product is paralysis and a clinging to the status quo that aims to preserve the military and secular institutions' control and limits the AKP's ability to implement reforms. By exploiting the nationalism issue in an attempt to undermine the AKP for internal political gain, the opposition simultaneously undermines the economic growth and social development generated by the EU accession process.

19. (C) Comment: Nationalism, as used by today's opposition, is a stick with which to beat the AKP. It contains no alternative vision; it is a bulwark against change, against AKP and against any intimation of creeping Islamization. It holds the danger of turning inward, against pressures for reform and change. Nationalism, as used by AKP - whether being pro-Turkish Cyprus or ardent in its fight against the PKK, is a banner it can wave to insulate itself from certain opposition attacks. In neither camp's hands is it a recipe for progress or change. It is a short-term, short-sighted

but expedient political tool that risks damaging Turkey's prospects in today's fast-changing, globalized world. Whether, come election time, Turks buy into it will tell us whether they are ready to modernize their concept of nationalism and allow reforms that eventually shift the balance of power toward civilians. End comment.

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